

99-06-27a

Let's prepare ourselves for the study of the Word of God this morning by taking a few moments in prayer. This is an opportunity to clear our minds, prepare our hearts, ensure that we are susceptible to the leading ministry of God the Holy Spirit as far as the perception of truth and the things that apply specifically to us in the portion of scripture that we study this morning. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you as always for the wonderful privilege we enjoy, an undeserved privilege, something that we could never merit, something we could never attain to in our own strength. We stand in a full relationship with you as children. We enjoy the freedom of access to come directly to you to represent ourselves before your throne.

We owe these great privileges and this great standing to our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you for him and for his continuing ministry of intercession on our behalf. We thank you for the presence of your Spirit which you have given to us as a seal and a guarantee that this relationship is not temporary, it's eternal.

It is something that is guaranteed by your own integrity, by your promises, by your Word. It's guaranteed by the complete sufficiency of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross in reconciling us and redeeming us and making us acceptable in your sight. We pray this morning as we worship through the study of your Word that God the Holy Spirit will overcome the limitations of our minds, our concentrations and limitations of the communicator.

We pray that the things that we see in your Word will feed and nourish our souls, that we will be strengthened and brought closer to the example and the pattern set in the earthly ministry of our Lord as he lived as a human being on this earth under the ministry of your Spirit guided in every aspect of his life by your Word. We pray that as we look at these things God the Holy Spirit will superintend. We pray that our fellowship, our conversation, our worship this morning will be pleasing in your sight.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. We resume our study this morning in Genesis chapter 24 and our scripture reading this morning is in 1 Corinthians chapter 12.

What is the relationship, you might ask, between 1 Corinthians chapter 12 and Genesis 24? The specific aspect of the story of the identification and bringing into the land and into the life of Rebekah as his wife in Genesis 24 raises some issues which I mentioned last time, it's been a couple of weeks since we met, but you may recall that at the beginning of our last study in this chapter we talked about the fact that there are in that account principles or illustrations in that example that bring to our mind ideas about divine guidance. After all, the servant of Abraham more or less puts out a fleece, doesn't he? When he gets to the well he says, Lord God let it be that the woman who offers to water my camels will be the one. That inevitably raises the question, is this a legitimate

way to determine the will of God to identify the right choice when we face decision points in our lives and we revisit the principles of living life before God.

How do we make our decisions? How do we determine the path that is in accord with the heavenly plan? It might not seem immediately apparent how 1 Corinthians chapter 12 applies to this. If you remember your significant chapters in the Bible, you have faith in Hebrews 11, you have love in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. It's easy once you remember 13 as the love chapter in 1 Corinthians to remember that chapter 12 precedes it, chapter 14 follows it and there is the discussion of spiritual gifts.

Chapter 14 is one of the most overlooked chapters in the Bible by those who take an active view of the baptism of the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit, who think that what has come to be known as the charismatic gifts are still in effect. There is a lot of guidance in chapter 14 about the function of such gifts which gets sort of short shrift. But here in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, Paul says, Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant.

You know that you were Gentiles carried away to these dumb idols, however you were led. Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit.

There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. Now I'll pause here to point out that we have in our frame of reference here, we have in our mind that this is talking about spiritual gifts.

But keep in mind, this is not only true as far as distinguishing individuals in the church, i.e., here's an individual that has the gift of pastor, teacher. Here's someone who has the gift of administration. Here's someone who has the gift of helps.

But keep in mind when Paul in verse 4 talks about diversities of activities and diversities of gifts, this is also true within our own lives. At different periods, in different circumstances, different situations, interaction with different people, there are different parts of our soul, different functions before God that take place. And these things are equally true.

There are diversities of gifts. All of us at one time or another have the opportunity to manifest help, to be a blessing or engage in ministry to other believers. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord.

Sometimes we all get the chance to teach, to speak the truth to one another in love. We all have the opportunity to pray. We all have the opportunity to engage in evangelism.

Verse 6, there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. So

my suggestion here is don't only think of these verses as referring to the differences between individuals in the church, but remember that this applies equally to differences in the different parts of our individual lives. There is the same God, the same Lord working in all the different areas of our life, even though these things may be different.

And this is a key, believe it or not, to understanding divine guidance and to understanding how we perceive and pursue the will of God. The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all. For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.

But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills. For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, a united body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.

For in fact the body is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body, is it therefore not of the body? If the ear should say, Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body, is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body.

And the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you. Nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary.

Those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, of these we bestow greater honor. And our unpresentable parts have greater modesty. But our presentable parts have no need.

But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, so that there should be no schism in the body. But the members should have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.

If one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ and members individually. And God has appointed these in the church.

First apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all

teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.

Paul follows this with the content of chapter 13, which is the description of love, which we're very familiar with. And his point is, it is not the description of your gift. It's not the nature or the specific function of your gift that counts.

It's whether or not that gift is exercised in love. If you understand what it's for, what is the purpose of spiritual gifts? Is it to give people a sense of power? Is it to give them a sense of personal value? Is it simply to bless others as an end in itself? To be a benefit to someone else? If you do benefit someone else, what is the value of that? That's a question upon which we can reflect. Ultimately, everything is measured by the value to God.

We tend to forget that, or we tend to see it forgotten, when we listen to much of what passes for teaching and preaching today in the public arena of the church. It is important to remember, and this is where it applies to us, that the measure isn't the circumstance. It's not the action that is performed.

It is the why and the how that counts. The smallest act, you think about the boy that was in the crowd with the five loaves and the two fishes, who put those in the hands of the Lord voluntarily, and it is what God did with that very small act. It doesn't seem like a big deal to say, well, I can surrender my lunch here.

It's what God does with those actions that counts. So, as we think about the content of our scripture reading this morning, 1 Corinthians 12, and what we remember from 1 Corinthians 13, it isn't necessarily that you are an eye or a hand or a foot. It isn't the specific content of your ministry as a believer to other believers that counts.

It is how it is done. How do you view the function of your own gift within the body of Christ? How do you view the function of someone else's gift in the body of Christ? Do you seize and lay hold of the opportunities that God provides to exercise that particular gift, that particular function, that kind of operation? Why do you do that? How do you do that? What do you think about it before, during, and after? That is the measure, and it may be a very small thing. There are people, which I have seen over the years, and that I still get the benefit of in different places, who do nothing but copy tapes.

It's behind the scenes. Nobody sees it. They sit under teaching like everyone else, but there are people who get tapes by mail because these people are faithful to perform that.

You think, well, it's such a mundane, repetitious thing. It requires some record-keeping and some rather tedious shuffling of cassettes in and out of machines and trying to keep

track and make sure one side is not blank and goofing around with postage and addressing and so forth. But to the extent that the teaching of the Word of God is conveyed to someone who needs it, that's a wonderful ministry.

There is very little glory attached to it. Nobody is, in most cases, ever going to call them up onto some podium and get a big round of applause or any sort of reward. In many cases, the result is invisible.

There is a good friend of mine who teaches in a setting much like ours up in Tulsa, and there is a lady in that church who duplicates the tapes of those lessons, and we are one of the people who get them. I like to keep track. I know most of the people in that group.

The pastor is a really close friend of mine. It's almost a form of vicarious fellowship to hear how their group is doing and to hear the thinking and the teaching that's going on up there. This lady patiently, month after month, year after year, duplicates these tapes and sends them to us.

They come to mail, and I get the blessing. I have no way to tell her all of the things that come to me through that. I'm sure that it's true of a lot of people who receive tapes.

There's no way to measure or to express the value that that accomplishes, yet the person that's doing it may think, well, anyone can do this, it's such a menial thing. The point here is the measure is not what you can see. It's not the extent to which you have worked.

It's not how hard you've had to labor. It isn't the visible result. It's why and how we do what we do.

It seems as though that principle is illustrated in a different setting here in Corinthians, and in fact it is, but if you'll turn with me now back to Genesis chapter 24, we're going to see the application of that same idea. When it comes to the function of Abraham's servant in the accomplishment of this task, the servant, after he's given his commission by Abraham, goes with the camels. Verse 10 of chapter 24, he took ten of his master's camels and departed.

All his master's goods were in his hand. He arose and went to Mesopotamia to the city of Nahor. You remember the details of his encounter with Rebekah? But in verse 12, he prays, and he says, O Lord God of my master Abraham, please give me success this day and show kindness to my master Abraham.

Behold, here I stand by the well of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. Now let it be that the young woman to whom I say, Please let down your pitcher that I may drink, and she says, Drink, and I will also give your camels a drink. Let her be the one you have appointed for your servant Isaac.

By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master. This is one of the famous passages where people go when they're addressing the subject of divine guidance. We can all think about our current set of circumstances, where we stand relationship-wise, work-wise, the various factors that we currently face today at this moment in the different areas of our life.

And in some one or more of those areas, we face a decision. We have choices. This is the nature of life.

This is why God leaves us in this world, is to make choices. So our next concern is, well, how do I make the best choice? How do I choose the thing that is best? The difficulty comes when you start defining best, when you evaluate what is the basis of evaluation of the best choice. Why do we have a concern level about whether this particular situation goes down the left fork in the road or the right fork in the road, or whether we reverse course and go back down the road we've traveled? What is our concern? Why do we care which way this goes? Why don't we just flip a coin and go on and not concern ourselves? Well, obviously, we think that there are consequences.

Something is going to happen based on the choice that I make. The issue is, what is our concern? Why are we concerned about that choice? How do we measure the beatitude of that choice? How do we measure whether it turned out well or turned out badly? And this goes back and affects the way we make the choice. For example, move to a new town for whatever reason.

A job situation has brought you there. You're there because you're going to school. There are a multitude of reasons why you relocate.

And you now have to make some sort of a housing choice for whatever reason. And if we care anything about God and the things of God, we want to make this choice. We may be making a large financial commitment.

Maybe we're going to assume a mortgage. Maybe we're going to realize that this is going to determine our neighborhood, our neighbors, our commute. It's going to affect everything.

It's going to be a daily circumstance. We're going to be inhabiting this dwelling for the foreseeable future. How do we choose? You go around and you shop houses.

We came down here to Dallas. Had to look around. Do we rent? Do we buy? Now that we've decided to buy, you go look at the different ones.

Well, this has this factor in its favor and so forth. What's going on in our mind? The reason this is important is God cares about the choices that we make. And we realize that.

And we know that, well, what if I wind up in the wrong place? What if I make the wrong choice? There could be serious circumstances. What if I buy and I overcommit? I commit financially and God hasn't made provision. Now I'm going into debt and so forth.

We get all of these factors going on in our minds. Same thing can happen in indecision about relationships. Should I pursue a friendship? Should I draw closer to someone in my periphery? Should I cut off contact with someone? Should I distance myself from someone? All sorts of different decisions face us and we have a concern level over.

And realizing that it's important to make a good evaluation and make good decisions, we then proceed in some fashion or other to make those choices. We weigh factors in our minds and we choose. The question is, have we done it right? Have we chosen in a way that pleases God? The traditional view for a believer, and we have some limiting factors.

Unlike someone in the world, we know off the top of our heads that, well, you don't just choose on a superficial basis. You don't just say, well, this is the thing that I want the most. Because we, knowing about our sinful nature, we're suspicious of our desires and we realize that sometimes the thing that we want is not the best thing.

This could be the lust pattern of our sinful nature. This could be you see something attractive and you want it, kind of like Eve wanting the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. She saw that it was desirable to make one wise and that it was good to look upon.

She grabbed it and ate it. Well, that was a bad decision. So we stop short of just the impulse or the knee-jerk reaction, hopefully.

We realize that there needs to be a biblical basis for making our choices. Here's where the problem comes in. Because when we go to the Bible, we come across stories like Genesis chapter 24.

We come across the passage in Judges where Gideon puts out the fleece. And we say, well, is this fleece putting out a valid thing? Can I take my doormat there by the back door and set it out on the lawn and ask God to make the dew on the grass and not on the doormat or vice versa? Can I call for a sign? If you think about it, what the servant does here when he says, let it be that the woman who speaks less of so is the one, he's asking God to predetermine a circumstance. And we do this.

There are believers who do this. Is this the biblical way? So we've gotten past stage one where we realize we're not just going to make our decisions willy-nilly and just go with what we feel. We're going to try to do things in a way that pleases God.

But now we've gone to the Bible and we find these examples. And at the same time we think, well, you know, God doesn't always part the Red Sea and come down on Mount Carmel and consume the altar and so forth. And maybe the things in the Bible are not

legitimate.

Is this fleece putting out a legitimate thing? Can I follow the example of this servant and ask God to predetermine a circumstance? I've had this happen to me. I had a friend who was trying to make a decision about a job. And he predetermined in his own mind that, well, this actually has been documented.

If you read Gary Friesen's book on decision-making and the will of God, he talks about this particular thing. It's under the heading of godly counsel. And someone decides that you're a godly person, and so they're going to come ask you what you think.

And whatever you say, that's what they're going to do. So they pray ahead of time and say, Lord, I don't know what to do in this situation. I can't make up my mind.

So I think old so-and-so over there has a lot of knowledge of the Bible. So I'm going to ask them what they think. And, Lord, whatever they tell me, that's what I'm going to do.

And I want you to bless and lead them to tell me the right thing. And you think, well, here you've got several wonderful biblical principles at work. You go to Proverbs 24 or someplace where it says, in the multitude of counselors there is safety and that kind of thing.

Well, I'll go consult with Christian friends whose judgment I respect. And the consensus of opinion I get from them, or I'll pick one out I think is the most godly, and I'll pick them and go with their counsel. You have others who look at the road signs of God's will, that there is an inner witness, that you'll have an impression.

Well, Lord, give me a sense of the direction you would have me go. Give me an inner witness of some sort. This could be the still, small voice that Elijah heard, or an urge, you just suddenly feel an impulse, like, well, there's a story Friesen tells in his book about a person who just got the urge.

They were going to go one place and said, you know, I really feel like I just need to go down to the hospital. And just on this urge, he went down to the hospital, and sure enough, here was a man on his deathbed who couldn't find someone to share the gospel with him. This person shared the gospel.

It came to Christ before he died. It was just this urge that came seemingly from out of nowhere, but the result of it was that something good happened. Sometimes people feel a burden.

They just feel led, if you will, to speak to someone, or to go somewhere, or to do a certain thing. You can't explain it, can't put any logic to it, or give any biblical verse or anything. It's just, something just feels, you just get the strong feeling that you ought to do something.

Some people say, well, I'm going to do this and see if I have peace about it. I'm going to go ahead and commit to what I think is likely, and I'll sort of do it on a trial basis and see if I have peace. And if I have peace about this, well, I know that if you are in the will of God, you'll have peace.

And so if I don't have peace, I'll backtrack and go the other way and see if I have peace in that route. So this inner witness, sort of based on the results, or on how we feel internally, is considered to be one of the roadsides in determining God's will. Sometimes we look and think that, well, I believe I'm growing in grace and the knowledge of the Lord and Savior, and I know that as I am molded more closely to the image of the Savior, my desires are going to conform themselves to the will of God.

And as long as it's not something immoral, then the desire, that's probably something God has put in my heart. That's a result of my inner transformation and my growth. And so when I desire something, I'll just trust that that's something God has put there as a result of my growth.

So when I desire something strongly, that's what I'll go with. Circumstances. This is one of the common ones where we look for an open door.

Well, I have a couple, three different choices here. I'll see which one really I feel the need for something to happen, and now suddenly someone has called. I've had a conversation.

Here's an open door. Here's a means of accomplishing this thing that I have the feeling needs to be done, or I need to make a decision, and now suddenly something has fallen into place. There's been what an unbeliever would call a fortuitous confluence of circumstances.

I guess they had a pretty big vocabulary to say that, but here things have just worked out really well to go in this direction. There seems to be a big, wide garage door to drive through here. And so we look for things falling into place, for circumstances that seem to ease the path to go in a particular direction.

And this is the category under which we find the food stain. We say, well, God, show me the way. Cause it to work out in circumstances where it will be kind of a big flashing neon sign, this is the way to go, and I'll know that that's the right decision.

I already mentioned about the godly counsel or the mature counsel. I'll go to someone who knows more than I do and see if they can give me a hint about which way to go. But here's the thing.

We've already, without really realizing it, we've taken a view that's limiting us when we examine these. I'm sure you've heard this, I've heard it now through the years, about determining the will of God. We've already unwittingly decided on a measure.

We've already decided that this decision is important because circumstances are going to, it's like knocking over a domino, the first domino in a line of dominoes. As soon as I make this choice, other dominoes are going to fall. It's going to have implications, it's going to have effects, and I want those to be good.

I want those to be the best. I'm concerned with the implications of the decision. And unconsciously, in a lot of cases, we don't want things to turn out badly.

And we also don't necessarily want to have to fight an uphill battle. We don't want to choose something that's going to involve a lot of difficulty, a lot of heartburn, a lot of getting crossways with people. We want this to be a fortuitous, happy, we want this to be the good, wide road.

And already we're thinking in terms of how will the circumstances turn out. How are the factors going to fall when I make this decision? We need to back up a step. Because that's not the issue.

It is not, have I made a wise decision financially? Have I made a wise decision relationship-wise? Is this going to put me in a position to be a better witness? Is this going to put me in a better position to exercise my gift? Is this going to put me in a better light with this person? Is this going to help me in whatever way? Am I going to be happy in this neighborhood or in this house or in this job or at this school with this person? We've already taken a step that we need to backtrack and evaluate. Because if we truly want to please God in our lives, the most important thing is not how these factors fall. The most important thing is, is God pleased with me? Is God pleased with my thought pattern? Is God pleased with my priorities? Is God pleased with my motivations? That's the question to ask.

It doesn't matter how it turns out. Strong thing to say, and I'm saying it with a weak voice. But it doesn't matter.

If you think about this, this is an element of faith. Do you trust God to take care of the outcome? I always think of that commercial they used to have on TV, You're in good hands with Allstate. It started out with a house in a neighborhood there.

They lift it out of the picture and then you see it in these cupped hands. They say, You're in good hands with Allstate. This is how we think about our relationship with God.

God will never suffer the righteous to be moved. You cannot fall into a place where God cannot provide, where God cannot accomplish His will. The issue is not what you choose.

The issue is why you choose it and how you choose it. This is where we need to concentrate our attention. This is where we need to spend our time.

We can overthink decisions. We can weigh the factors and try to figure out, Well, what

about this? What about that? A better approach is to evaluate the thoughts and intents of our heart in the light of the Word of God. Are we committed wholeheartedly to pleasing God in what we do? Are we willing to do the hard thing? The trouble with the open door, closed door approach is you never know when a door is open if it's a trap door.

You see in cartoons where a cartoon character opens the door and walks out and they've just left the building on the sixth floor. That's an open door. Somebody's got the door locked and they're wanting to beat their way in and so they ram it a few times and they back up and they're really going to give it a big slam with the shoulder and the character inside opens the door just as they get there and they fly right on through the room and out the window.

That's an open door. How do we know that a closed door is not a test of faith? To trust God for what doesn't appear to be possible, what doesn't appear to be likely, what doesn't seem to be workable in human terms. God is the God of the impossible.

God's ways are higher than our ways. We look at something and say, well it's never going to happen and God makes it happen and it looks like a closed door. So open door, closed door, you can't just say, well the door was open, I walked through it.

We wind up down there with the Looney Tunes character. What we can do, what we can have faith in, is that if we commit our way unto Him, if we say, Lord, I'm facing this decision, I'm going to evaluate it in the light of your moral will. I know certain things are wrong.

I know that even though I may have a desire to spend time with some person, that's not an option for me for whatever reason. You may have some attractive person in your periphery of the opposite sex, but you're married or they're not a believer or there's some other limiting factor and it's an easy decision. This is how affairs get started where someone in a work environment, they're married and they sort of compromise and say, well I would never have a physical affair with this person, but they're staying late working and I'll stay late at work or I'll dress with them in mind or some other sort of concession to the idea that, well, this is interesting, it's stimulating to just fantasize or to just, without any even physical plan in mind, to make decisions that are not in keeping with dedication to the person you have married or dedication to God, to sort of say, well, this is harmless, this isn't a wrong thing, I'm not committing adultery, I'm just spending a little extra time.

And we can do this in a lot of different areas, it's easy to illustrate there, but something that's financially beneficial, people in the privacy of their office when they work out their taxes and you decide, well, should I deduct this or not? I can sort of justify this, the law says this portion of your house, if it's 100% dedicated to business use, then you can take a deduction on it and so forth, and well, I use it sometimes for that, but the fact that I

also use it to store all my personal gear or whatever, nobody's looking, nobody's there, government's got plenty of other people's tax money, what difference does it really make? I could use this extra \$200 I'll get in my refund if I work my taxes a certain way and we think, well, where's the harm? This is where we really find our faith tires meeting the asphalt, because God can bless us, God can provide for us without a compromise. God is watching the thoughts and intents of the heart, and it's why we make these decisions. It's not the outcome of the decision.

We say, well, see, this is a harmless decision because there's no outcome. I can spend an extra hour down at the office or down at this place or I can have sort of a mild flirtation with somebody because there's not going to be any outcome. I would never pursue this to the point of it being an affair or adultery or anything like that.

It's just sort of a little stimulating thing to do. Wrong. This is what Jesus was getting at when he said, when you consider something in your heart, it's as good as performing the act.

The idea is, what is God seeing when he looks at the way you think and the way you make your decisions and the way you set your priorities? This is what counts. It is not the outcome. So this reminds us of what we saw in 1 Corinthians 12.

It's not whether or not you have a big ministry or a little ministry, a big gift or a little gift. It's not whether or not you can see the results in the lives of other people. It's your attitude before the Lord.

Are you willing? Are you humble? Do you recognize the function of others' gifts and recognize that that's not something you can do? Here's someone that evangelizes. I haven't had that opportunity and don't seem to be particularly gifted in that area. We don't get a guilty conscience or feel like, well, so-and-so is doing that.

I need to go do that. They really seem to be able to encourage. I don't seem to be much of an encourager.

Well, I'm going to go try to be more of an encourager. I see this person over here. I'm going to try to do what they do.

To be content to look for those opportunities that God gives us and the particular knack or gift that we have in the area of blessing. Even if it's invisible and nobody sees it, nobody appreciates it, nobody touts it, that we know that before the Lord we're taking advantage of those opportunities that come our way. What does this have to do with Genesis 24 and Abraham's servant? How do we reconcile now? How do we sort out when we find these illustrations in Scripture where Gideon puts out the fleece or the servant sets a criteria for the woman at the well? We're going to pause here and take our break.

When we come back, we'll try to answer that question.

